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ABSTRACT

A study was based on retrospective descriptions obtained from interviews with a large number of teachers who have taught for over 20 years. Three areas of change in students were consistently noted in the descriptions: children today know more, are freer, and grow up more rapidly. More autonomous, and armed with greater knowledge, children emerge from childhood more rapidly. Societal influences have had much impact on children, parents, teachers, and schooling. Television and other media have also consistently influenced children and schooling. Changes in the family structure, the relationship between parents and children, the increase in peer group influence, and in children's attitudes toward teachers and school are equally important. Educators today are faced with youngsters who, by the time they reach high school, have acquired many material possessions, been entertained and partially educated by the media, achieved a sophisticated degree of sexual awareness, and attained self-reliance by virtue of changes in the quality of family support. These young people, having achieved many visible features of adult status, find it difficult to think of themselves as needing still more preparation for life. (JD)

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THE CHANGING AMERICAN CHILD:
THE PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATORS

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A Report to the

National Commission on
Excellence in Education

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THE CHANGING AMERICAN CHILD: THE PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATORS*

Introduction

During the first post-Darwinian century that has just ended, surely one of the most important ideas to take root is that of human development. Childhood has been looked at through a much more powerful lens as efforts continue to differentiate its formative stages. Almost daily we hear of new evidence that the beginnings of lifelong patterns of behavior occur earlier than we had supposed, and that the first stages of growth are times of both great influence and vulnerability. In contemplating the forces that shape the development that we have just begun to chart, it is natural to wonder how today's children are being influenced by the rapid currents of social and technological change. How is psychological development affected by such factors as the rising divorce rate, changing sexual mores, increased tendency for mothers to take full-time jobs even when their children are very young, the general uprootedness of families, and the technological advances that affect what we know and how we communicate? This paper reports the principal findings of an effort to assess how American children are changing, how children of today are different from their counterparts of 25 to 30 years ago, and examines their implications for education. The study is based on the retrospective descriptions of change obtained from individual interviews with a large number of experienced teachers--some 170 teachers, each of whom had taught for over 20 years.

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The examination of current behavior in the light of levels previously achieved is usually signaled by intimations of a downward trend in quality that needs to be arrested, as exemplified by Barbara Tuchman's recent lament, "The Decline of Excellence." Such gloomy stock-taking of our current ways evokes widespread nods of affirmation and, at the same time, invites derisive reminders from historians that such warnings of social failure have been recorded since the time of Aristotle and beyond. How can it be that some of these very same criticisms and stern warnings have been expressed at so many different points in history? Have these same characteristics been undergoing a steady decline over centuries, or do they tend to slide from time to time only to recover as a result of the alarm sounded by vigilant society watchers? Or are these reports mere figments, periodic eruptions of displaced personal anxiety and disappointment that fall on the welcome ears of similarly afflicted fault-finders? This complicated issue is not easily resolved; it should sober efforts to study how children are changing without deterring them.

Rationale and Dimensions of the Study

The task of describing patterns of change and gauging their overall impact is beset with difficulties. We need to be concerned not only with the accuracy of assessments, but with their aptness and completeness. Have the most appropriate dimensions of change been singled out and are they being measured properly? A failure to detect change may result from the faulty choice of dimensions to study or the inability to achieve valid measurement. Thus, the investigation of change is open not only to the error of choosing the wrong thing to study, but of assessing the right thing improperly.

To complicate matters further, a method of assessment may be correct at one moment in time but not at another. This error is committed when educators hold students to a standard that adequately captured the level of performance in the past, but which fails to provide valid measurement of present-day performance. To cite an extreme example, it would be manifestly inappropriate to study the level of motor coordination and manual dexterity in today's child by gauging his or her ability to shoot marbles or play with jacks even though such indices may well have been appropriate years ago. By the same token, educators commit the same error, although it is more difficult to discern, when they measure a child's word knowledge by using a vocabulary test that was standardized decades before or make inferences about a child's numerical reasoning ability on the basis of a timed test of knowledge of the multiplication tables. In some instances, educators cling to old standards in order to reassert the importance of abilities and skills that have begun to be sidetracked or neglected. But, in many cases, educators hold to previously established standards automatically and arbitrarily, simply because they are most familiar with them, and fail to recognize the built-in biases that distort their assessment of current patterns of growth.

One might expect the study of how children are changing to proceed by replicating measures available in the data banks of 20 to 30 years' standing with an equivalent sample (in age, region, socioeconomic status, and other relevant variables) drawn from today's child population. However, a study using data banks would be ineluctably tied to the accidents and fads of measurement 30 years ago and to the vagaries of data bank storage. Further, it is never easy to replicate a sample and a procedure used in previous obtained decades, and the failure to achieve equivalence would nullify the efforts of such a study. In addition,

because of the exceedingly limited validity of systematic efforts to measure important aspects of psychological functioning, it may well be that the outcome of such a comparative study would be more revealing of deficiencies of measurement of the phenomena being probed than of inter-generational change.

For these reasons, it was decided to rely, instead, on the collective judgments of experienced educators (i.e., those who have been teaching the same aged children from roughly the same home background for at least 20 years). Obviously, a method based on retrospective observations is vulnerable to various forms of distortion. People simply do not remember accurately. There is also a tendency to idealize the past, to remember it in more favorable terms than the present. In thinking about the past, we may collapse the rich and outstanding achievements of a decade and treat them as though they had the same probability of occurrence as events and accomplishments of a single ongoing semester.

Furthermore, it is probable that an informant who has taught for over 20 years may find his or her work less stimulating and challenging and, in turn, may be less stimulating to children, and might thereby evoke less sparkling and enthusiastic patterns of response from them. It is not uncommon for the aging and fatigued educator to attribute the decline in one's own effectiveness to shortcomings in the children. Teachers who suffer from what we have come to term "burn-out" are likely to magnify the deficiencies of the children.[1] These problems notwithstanding, the

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[1]One way to identify the degree to which extended teaching experience tends to sour the perception of children is to compare the descriptions of children today made by older teachers with those of the less fatigued teachers. By interviewing younger teachers in the same schools, it was possible to record the degree to which older informants harbored more negative assessments of today's children and, thereby, to approximate the degree to which their comparisons between yesterday and today were distorted by a negative view of today's children.

method has the advantage of utilizing the full sweep of intensive, relevant experience, and of gauging change on the basis of integrated experience rather than brief observational samples of behavior that may not be representative of more pervasive styles of behaving.

The discussion of possible sources of error has thus far dwelled on various reasons why we are likely to remember the past in more favorable terms and therefore, conversely, to view current changes in children negatively. But there is reason to believe that the error of greatest probability of occurrence is the failure to see change at all. Adaptation to change occurs quickly, sometimes instantaneously. Our tendency to habituate to progressive modifications in stimulus level is a major impediment to apprehending change.

Further, it may be speculated that teachers as a group may be especially insensitive to change because their profession is, in effect, devoted to preserving and sustaining continuity in society. It is the job of the schools to transmit the culture and thereby maintain stability. If we accept the premise that teachers are guardians of the continuity of our cultural heritage, then it may be argued that the school is the last place in which to observe change. The mere fact that schools have been with us for so long identifies them as a conservative force. If we interviewed video game distributors or astronauts or other persons engaged in occupations that did not even exist 30 years ago, it may well be that we would find people with a much stronger appetite for change and who are more likely to see it. On the other hand, there are obvious reasons for turning to educators to learn about change in children. Educators are deeply immersed in the lives of children and see a full cross-section of the child population.

However, it should be noted that, in turning to the perspective of educators, this study was not designed to survey teachers' observations. The goal of the study was not to assess perceptions of change in the typical teacher, but to marshall evidence from many sources. It was assumed that the task of delineating psychological change is elusive and complex, requiring the observational skills and integrative capacities of numerous people. Each of us is attuned to different aspects of psychological reality; we have different areas of awareness and sensitivity. The task of portraying change in children entails filling a vast canvas; a large number of informants was needed to begin to complete the mural and to provide a degree of consensual validation to the project. The 170 educators who constituted the final group of informants were an admixture of selected and randomly chosen teachers of children at all levels of primary and secondary schools from urban, suburban, and rural public and private schools from New York, Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, and California. It should also be noted that the study was directed at observations of children from middle-class backgrounds. Because children from the inner city and from minority group families were presumed to be undergoing more complicated patterns of change, they were excluded from this study.

Although the total number of 170 informants seems quite sizeable, when these informants are subdivided according to grade level and region, each cell contains relatively few people. The number of rural kindergarten teachers interviewed, for example, was comparatively small. But, in this respect, it should be noted that there was a remarkable concordance of viewpoint of teachers irrespective of the age of children taught and the geographic locations of their schools. It is not that all teachers

said the same thing, but that there was a congruence to their overall perspective with regard to patterns of change. This uniformity of perspective does not ensure that their observations correspond to reality, but it does suggest that the sample of informants did not constitute a diverse and atypical group whose observations were haphazard.

The descriptions of change provided by teachers are limited in scope and detail. The numerous advances in science and technology that have improved the quality of life of children would fill volumes. Just 40 years ago, for example, only one farmhouse in three had electricity. There have been corresponding advances in sanitation, diet, medical care, and other factors that affect children's health and physical development. As a result, illness in childhood that requires hospitalization has all but vanished. In countless ways, children are growing up under more stimulating and supportive circumstances. More parents are literate, are familiar with the ways of the school, and are sensitized to information about childrearing and to a psychological frame of reference. As a result of advances in birth control methods, there is more family planning, at least in the middle class. Families are smaller and siblings are less closely clustered in age. Children live in more comfortable and better equipped homes that are less densely populated, and grow up in a social climate that tends to be less authoritarian.

When educators speak of today's children, these improvements in the quality of life are not cited, they are taken for granted. They become defining properties of today's child and family, points of departure for assessing change rather than indicators of change per se. However, these changes probably do influence a teacher's posture toward the children in her class. If we think of most teachers as having a tendency to react to

children in tiers, to grade them implicitly (perhaps even unwittingly) in terms of each child's potential responsiveness to school--according to various criteria that might include the educational background of the parents as well as various attributes f the child, including intelligence, sophistication, social poise, and self-presentation--then there are more children today of the first rank, more children whom the teacher feels impelled to take seriously. But the overall performance of children does not live up to these higher teacher expectations, whether it is because these outward signs of promise are no longer dynamically related to actual responsiveness to school, or because schools function differently today, or have a different meaning for children. In describing change, teachers tend to dwell on areas of perceived decline that stem from the reordering of priorities and the inevitable tradeoffs of gains and losses associated with change, and they note the emergence of unexpected outcomes or side effects that serve as impediments to the development they are striving to effect.

Trends of Change in the Psychological Development of Children

When we begin to catalogue the changes that are taking place in the psychological development of children, three constellations of change stand out. Children today know more, are freer, and grow up more rapidly. These interrelated trends reinforce each other. Increased knowledge begets freedom, and freedom allows for the acquisition of knowledge. More autonomous and armed with greater knowledge, children emerge from childhood more rapidly.

Greater knowledge. Most teachers, especially those of younger children, are impressed with how much brighter children seem and how much more they know. Children are described as streetwise and knowing about a

much wider range of things. They are more mobile, travel more widely, and know about far-away places. Children have more money and are active consumers; they know more about handling money, shopping, and acquiring material possessions. From television they have a headline knowledge, and from watching assorted documentary programs, have acquired a smattering of knowledge and sense of awareness over a wide range of phenomena.

More freedom. Children are more open and self-assertive and, correspondingly, less timid and shy. They have a more questioning and challenging attitude toward authority and are less intimidated by adults. They require less supervision and less of their life is centered in the home. Children express feelings more easily and are less inhibited about expressing anger, either physically or verbally. They appear to be more accepting of their sexuality and less burdened by feelings of guilt.

Accelerated development. Almost all teachers speak of how children are growing up more rapidly. At every age level, children look larger and more fully developed than their agemates of decades ago. Kindergarten teachers no longer find the wide-eyed innocent child in their classrooms. Whatever the criterion--whether it be social poise, physical appearance, onset of puberty, increased investment in the peer group, or the time when sexual interest and activity increases--children are seen as reaching developmental landmarks sooner. Correspondingly, teachers report teaching particular areas of subject matter at an earlier age. The task of growing up and developing competence is being achieved at a faster rate.

In reviewing these advances in independence and brightness, it is apparent that they are consonant with and have been influenced by the values and principles of the child development and mental health movements. The inner strength that is associated with psychological solidity

depends on knowing and understanding the world around us. The greater independence and sense of freedom achieved by most of today's children strengthens their adaptive capacities. It is terrifying and degrading to feel helpless and controlled from without. Children's fear of adult authority tends to stifle their own personal expression and may lead to lifelong patterns of frustrating timidity and inappropriate rage. In addition, anxiety associated with repressed conflicts revolving around sexual and aggressive impulses has been found to be a major cause of mental illness and to impair adjustment patterns within the normal range. The theoretical construct of ego strength, invoked to characterize the inner resources available to the individual to cope effectively with environmental challenges and to achieve a feeling of satisfaction and contentment, has both its antecedents and consequences defined in terms of competence and independence.

Influenced by these same trends of thought, the schools have gradually adopted many of the principles of child-centered education that are derived from the psychodynamic theory of development and the educational philosophy of John Dewey. Educators have come to believe that children learn more effectively when they are allowed to engage in active exploration, have greater opportunity for personal and individual expression, and receive more respectful treatment from adults. In order to deliver children from the dominating and often oppressive yoke of the overseeing adult, school buildings have been designed to appear warmer and more informal and to reflect the mood and perspective of children. Rules and regulations are less arbitrary and rigid, and children are offered choices, and allowed to move about and learn from each other. If children appear to be more competent and independent, it is because the schools have helped them to feel this way.

Intellectual Functioning

Greater background knowledge. Although children are seen as brighter, more quick-witted, and as knowing more, as they grow older their development diverges from traditionally defined expectations and the accelerated pace of intellectual growth appears not to be sustained. Teachers of young children call attention to their greater alertness and awareness, extraordinary worldliness, and larger speaking vocabularies. Their presence, their ability to communicate and negotiate for themselves are impressively advanced.

Children come to school with a vastly larger and more diverse background of information than those of previous generations. Above all, television--but also the great variety of new books and publications now available to children, the toys, games, and audiovisual devices ushered in by the new technology, and the increased opportunity for travel--converge to form a barrage of informational input. Those children who are guided in the use of such resources and who are themselves gifted and who are able to integrate their school learning with their out-of-school experiences show prodigious amounts of knowledge and mastery. They pass through school with a breadth of knowledge and a level of sophistication that towers above that of preceding generations. But, for a great many children, school does not seem to be a suitable vehicle for extending and clarifying what they have already learned. Nor do they show a need for such amplification.

The greater knowledge that the young child brings to school is regarded as a mixed blessing by some educators. It is often dismissed as sketchy and incomplete, as lacking in substance and integration. At the same time, some teachers are impressed with the greater range of chil-

dren's knowledge, with the sense of familiarity they convey in a wide variety of topics. These fragments of information may be seen as seedlings of knowledge to be cultivated by the alert teacher, or as contributing to a sea of confusion that both reflects and reinforces the shallowness and rootlessness of life today. On the one hand, the teacher is dealing with a more knowledgeable person. On the other, she is dealing with a more confused person, one who perhaps is already accustomed to being confused, and who has less of a need to sort out and clarify what is being experienced. Teachers fear that children have become habituated to the fragmentary, untidy quality of learning and knowledge that they acquire from random snatches of television watching.

Orientation to school. Accustomed to paying attention only to that which strikes their fancy, to tune out or turn the dial, it is difficult for today's children to settle into the more rigid and less stimulating regimen of the classroom. They have been exposed to expertly planned communications accompanied by dazzling photographic illustration and elucidation, and grow impatient with the comparatively modest efforts of the classroom teacher. Most teachers bemoan the limited attention span, impaired listening skills, and diminished motivation that they find in today's children, and the insuperable difficulties of competing with the slick productions of television. Above all, teachers must contend with the fact that children no longer regard the school as the major window to the world.

In the not-too-distant past, the child, upon first arriving at school, was pictured as an empty vessel gradually to be filled by the teacher with prescribed information. Since teachers then constituted a major source of stimulation in a child's life, they were in a much

stronger position to regulate what and how children learned. However, today's child finds the tunnelled pathway of the teacher less inviting now that bridges and other alternative routes are available. Educators, too, have begun to reexamine traditional methods and to adopt a less rigid posture with regard to what and how children should learn. The new flexibility allows for more interesting and varied early learning, but it would appear that the message of the teacher in an informal, noisy classroom loses some of its power when it lacks the ritual and bombast associated with more traditional education.

The old-fashioned curriculum, undergirded by holidays and arbitrarily chosen major historical events, led to a wasteful overlearning of certain facts to the exclusion of others. However, it provided a structure and a universality to the knowledge that was purveyed in school, and fostered the belief that the school was leading the child through steps that absolutely had to be taken in order to reach the promised land. The old methods were unnecessarily rigid and not especially productive as a means for organizing and fostering enduring learning. They would surely not be compatible with the heightened sophistication and independence of today's children, nor could they compete effectively with the new sources of knowledge and modes of learning. They had the virtue, however, of presenting a framework that foreshadowed the larger edifice yet to be built, and provided a common set of reference points for assimilating and ordering new knowledge. This overly rigid, not always illuminating or exciting framework, is in striking contrast with the prevailing mood of rapid change and fluidity and the preoccupation with novelty that is reinforced by advertising, recorded music, and the media.

In examining the current pathway of intellectual development, it has been noted that children are reared today under conditions that foster a

greater sense of personal autonomy and in a social climate that rejects authority. They acquire much of their worldly knowledge from watching television, from a source over which they have almost total control. They are almost never forced to watch television, are usually able to choose what they watch, and can further regulate their experience by tuning out the auditory input, by ceasing to process the auditory stimulation. Having learned so much so comfortably and voluntarily, and retaining more-or-less continuous access to this painless source of information and stimulation, children are less ready to acquire new knowledge by having it imposed upon them, by having adults inform them under oppressively didactic or coercive circumstances. Children are less responsive to the prescribed forms of instruction offered by the school. It seems to them less necessary and they, in turn, feel less compelled and less willing to exert effort in response to an external demand.

Independence and goal achievement. Needing adult guidance less because of their greater knowledge and independence, young children have more opportunity to experience the world from the vantage point of the child, that is, more concretely and hedonistically. The young child behaves in terms of functional, means-ends relationships. More autonomous, vigorous and singleminded in the pursuit of gratification, there are fewer occasions when the child feels obliged to postpone gratification because of the needs or wishes or warnings of a guiding adult. In the name of fostering greater autonomy in children, and because adults feel less needed and also want to be relieved of their responsibility of being needed, there are fewer instances in which the adult interposes a delay in gratification because of the dictates of reality or morality. Receiving less adult input and guidance, children hear less about abstract and

spiritual dimensions of the events they experience. As self-regulation for young children becomes more pervasive by virtue of advances in technology and preferred styles of childrearing, it may be speculated that the conditioning processes that mediate children's learning and socialization experiences are based on reinforcing agents that are more concretely related to the goals sought by the child. They are less involved with relational, symbolic reinforcers, with rewards that are shaped and defined by the intervening, intermediary role of the caring adult. That is, the reward system that governs the child's way of navigating in the environment is more directly concerned with concrete associations and linkages to the gratification that is sought, rather than with affective ties to adults who provide fear reduction and a feeling of safety. Further, the greater autonomy experienced by children renders the visual world of here and now so vivid and compelling that abstract and hidden ideas and meanings arouse less interest.

More capable of acting to obtain what they need and want and, conversely, less dependent on other people to provide gratification that may entail greater delay, children encounter fewer delays and, consequently, it may be speculated that they develop less tolerance for the delay of gratification. In addition, by virtue of having formed less strong ties of dependency to adults, it may be speculated that children have had less experience in inhibiting the rage and impatience that are inevitably aroused by delays dictated by adults whose affective ties must, at all costs, be preserved. These patterns are further reinforced by the fact that technological progress is largely defined in terms of speeding up of services and is primarily aimed at reducing delays of gratification.

In the light of these trends, it is difficult for children to think in terms of longterm goals and to accept the value of a particular learn-

ing task in terms of its future theoretical or practical usefulness. Children are more insistent upon seeing the immediate payoff value of any action they are asked to take and are reluctant to expend energy on a given activity if its benefits are not tangible and immediately forthcoming. The concept of a steppingstone that is part of a longterm process, so fundamental to academic learning, is more difficult for today's child to understand and accept. Moreover, the world is changing so rapidly and unexpectedly, and so many institutions and relationships that at first seemed to be permanent are now in a state of transition that it is more difficult for children to seriously entertain the idea of a stable, predictable future toward which current effort will prove to be a fruitful investment. The instability of modern life does not inspire confidence in the ultimate payoff of delayed gratification.

Not only do children want to be shown the usefulness of the skills or knowledge they are being asked to acquire, they are seen as generally less willing to exert effort or to face the tedium that is entailed in various aspects of academic learning. As a result, activities that require concentration, attention to detail, and sustained repetition and drill, such as memorization and computation, are less well developed. In addition, rule-governed aspects of academic learning, including spelling and grammar, are also more difficult for today's children.

Adaptation to visual and auditory sensory input. Children appear to have changed in their patterns of responsiveness to auditory and visual aspects of sensory input. They seem to be less tuned in auditorially. They have much more difficulty in analyzing and differentiating sounds, in remembering them, and attend less well to spoken messages. They are much more accustomed to functioning in a visual world. It is as though the

auditory channel is deemed to be bearing less important messages, and less attention is directed at tracking information that arrives by that route.

On the other hand, the visual appearance of things has become so compelling, so fundamental to definition, that it is difficult for children to picture something as being different from the way it is. The task of picturing something not seen, that is, an object or an action, is more difficult for children, perhaps because they are saturated with images and pictures and have grown dependent on them as the basic method of apprehending reality. Words amplify and clarify visual images, but the visual image remains the core of experience, the key to apprehending.

Most imagery and fantasy of today's children, as they are reflected in writing and other forms of self-expression, are dominated by television viewing experience. When called upon to make up a story or to engage in some other form of construction, children seem to be more stymied than in previous years and almost invariably turn to television themes. It is more difficult for children to engage in such imaginative exercises as thinking about and acting out how someone might have lived or functioned at another time period or in another place.

Reading and writing. The written word seems less important; children are less fond of writing than in the past. They are less aware of the rules of grammar and spelling and less interested in the structural properties of written language. The physical act of writing is itself discomforting to some children; they have had less practice.

Similarly, children find it more difficult to process the written word. They are less motivated to read a dense tract of factual material and less adept at analyzing and remembering what was stated. Reading is less often seen as an intrinsically pleasurable activity. When children

do read, it is more often for the purpose of gaining information; they appear to be much less interested in reading fiction than in the past.

Children tend to find clerical tasks more distasteful than they have in the past. They are, for example, less adept at working with catalogue systems in libraries and other modes of accessing and organizing the written word. They have less patience and less skill in attending to detail. They require more assistance in dealing with written assignments, often needing to be guided at every step. Children have come to view the realm of reading and writing as a vestigial arena of ritualistic and arbitrary imposition of adult authority, and learn to avoid it. Their resistance to learning and developing skills in reading comprehension, in writing, in following directions, and performing clerical tasks becomes increasingly important in the upper school grades, and forms a serious barrier to effective academic achievement. As always, children want to get out of school whatever it is that they find useful, while avoiding getting caught up in its numerous oppressive aspects. However, they hold the school in less awe, feel less obligated to "measure up," more openly express their irritation and disdain for school, and resist school more flatfootedly.

Speaking ability. Children seem to be much better able to express themselves and to speak before a group. They are exposed to many more styles of verbal expression and conversation on television, as well as to modes of elaborated discourse usually reserved for adults. Television also affords access to an endless stream of models of public speaking. When one considers the impact of television, combined with the influence of changing mores with regard to self-assertion and the early social environment provided by preschools, it is not surprising that children are found to be more articulate and poised in their speech.

Knowledge: organization and meaning. It is more difficult for children to order their expanding knowledge. A greater portion of their knowledge is derived from out-of-school, less explicitly instructional sources. Television and travel experiences add a new dimension of knowledge and experience that enables the child to clarify what was previously taught and to arrive at a new level of understanding. But, more often, such experiences provide fragments of information, glimpses into a realm that is otherwise unknown. The child finds these diverse and seemingly unrelated fragments of knowledge stimulating and even comforting. They introduce a vague sense of familiarity with a wide range of phenomena. At the same time, the child becomes habituated to this quality of untidy, incompletely understood knowledge. As the tolerance for such incompleteness and confusion builds, such fragmented knowledge is easily assimilated as part of the spray of titillation that television affords. Just as we find it difficult to learn the grammar of a language that we already know because we tend to be less interested in the infrastructure of a knowledge system once we are familiar with its superstructure, so children tend to be less receptive to the study of foundations of subject matter about which they already know something.

Teachers tend to take a dim view of the wider range of knowledge that children gain from television. They dismiss it as superficial, claiming that such snatches of information are filled with distortions and misunderstandings that create an illusion of knowledge, a false image punctured by the most elementary probe. Yet, some understanding is deepened by access to television; some phenomena receive more elaborated and graphic elucidation on television than they can receive in the classroom. At the same time, the scope of knowledge to which children are exposed is

so vast and far beyond what they can understand that children today, more than ever before, are exposed to many more facts and concepts that do not make sense to them. Many teachers, especially in the area of social studies, state that one of their main educational activities is directed at following up and elaborating what is seen on television.

However, as more energy is given over to clarifying knowledge obtained outside of the classroom, it becomes more difficult to adapt to a framework that is academically centered and classroom bound. Children are ill-disposed to learn such material and teachers to teach it. The idea that childhood is a distinct epoch requiring a prolonged and encapsulated period of growth and learning is being shed as children receive less protection and are moved more rapidly into the world of adulthood. It is not surprising, then, to observe that education is moving toward a pattern established for adult education, an education that is mainly directed toward survival training.

In striking contrast to television broadcasting that is geared to people of all ages and backgrounds and packaged in units of 30 to 60 minutes without attempting to achieve a sense of continuity or cumulative synthesis, school instruction has been traditionally viewed as presenting a tree of knowledge. The roots and trunk are learned first, ploddingly, to produce thorough absorption and a sound foundation. As the elaboration of basic facts permits the comprehension of greater complexity, exploration of the limbs begins. But this idyllic image of solid organization and structure gradually unfolding over time seems no longer to apply. The structure of knowledge is changing so rapidly that, not only does the tree have many more branches that are more richly foliated, but the exact shape of the tree, including whether it is in fact really a tree at all, is

being called into question. As society becomes less traditional, and religion a less potent cultural and spiritual force, there are fewer universal themes and less consensus about which events, places, and personages should form the basic framework for most realms of knowledge. While curriculum experts race to keep pace with the burgeoning accumulation of information and to revise their mapping of instructional knowledge accordingly, there is less clarity about what constitutes a solid curriculum structure.

The functioning of families follows the same pattern. During this era of rejection of tradition and ritual, when flexibility is especially valued, and new modes of family functioning and organization are being called forth by divorce and/or mother working, there is less regularity and predictability to family life. Parents are less available to answer questions, provide clarification and reassurance, and present a sense of continuity. These forces, it may be speculated, serve to vitiate the child's own expectation of external order and sense of inner stability and help to explain why teachers see children as lacking an organization and structure on which to hang their facts.

Among the forces that undermine the development of integrative functioning, television stands out. Teachers report that many children arrive at school with their minds filled with the stimulation and anxiety activated by the previous night's viewing. Children deal with the high level of stimulation by talking about it. They are too filled with the experience, and often too agitated, to confront new tasks and learning opportunities. Their heads are in a whirl. Some are bleary-eyed from late night watching. In very young children, themes played out on television, usually of violence, dominate their dramatic play, just as they do

the conversations of their older peers. For some children, it may not be an exaggeration to describe time spent in school as a period of recovery from television.

When motivated, children have the skills and self-confidence to do research with great effectiveness. They are seen as more alert and resourceful and as having more initiative, and as being more questioning and challenging. At the same time, there is an impatience, an interest in getting on with things that lead children to perfunctory execution. They take less pride in getting things just right, seem to be less concerned with accuracy or neatness and completeness. As a result, they are frequently seen as functioning below their capacities. Children's knowledge is so far-ranging and fragmentary that it is difficult to adopt an attitude of tidiness. And teachers are less ritualistic and repetitious. There is less of a style and less of an appetite of dwelling on something --repeating and repeating, and mastering. In effect, there is less compulsion, and so there is less compulsiveness.

In noting the hodgepodge of information that television conveys, one teacher deplores the degree to which children are diverted from the developmental experiences that they need most for growing up. She emphasizes the progression of learning that is needed to achieve mastery, the importance of learning and discovering things at the right moment, so that what is learned is not only more clarifying and exciting, but forms the foundation for deductive thinking. The opportunity to mull over, digest, and discover at the right moment is lost by the pell-mell accumulation of information.

Forces that interfere with learning. Children, especially in urban settings, wrestle with imponderables today more than in earlier times.

They are concerned with a multitude of things that they don't understand, whether it is the reasons for discord between their parents and the imminent or actual threat of family breakup, or matters dealing with sex, social problems, political issues and the threat of nuclear war, or violence and crime that is impossible to control. Television is the source of much of this vague knowledge, but it is also frequently introduced or elaborated by parents. One reason why parents are more prone to discuss such matters is that they tend to overestimate the maturity of their sophisticated children. Also, in the new spirit of openness it is expected that all subjects should be dealt with. Some parents are themselves so disturbed by these imponderables because of the vivid reporting of the media that they have a strong need to share their anxiety with other family members. In some cases, parents see that their children have already been exposed to these disturbing ideas and feel the necessity to help clarify thoughts and issues that they would otherwise choose not to disclose to their children. This vague knowledge enters the lives of children and interferes with learning because of the anxiety it arouses and the distraction it causes. In addition, these more complicated and compelling issues make other phenomena seem trivial in comparison, and can be used to rationalize the resistance to academic learning.

In attempting to account for the decline in reading that she has observed over the years, one teacher emphasizes how important it is for a child to feel secure in his/her own place, life, and rhythm before she/he can put her/himself in another place. If children are anxious and vigilant, they are less able to suspend this monitoring and processing of potential danger. Television, with its more compelling pattern of stimulation, allows children to abandon their watchfulness, but reading is less capable of permitting this diversion of attentiveness.

The intellectual functioning of children is viewed through a sharper lens these days. Teachers have a more differentiated view of the learning skills of children and, in particular, a greater awareness of the existence of learning disabilities. Whether or not it is because of their heightened awareness, teachers believe that there are more children with various forms of learning disability.

Also more widespread is the impairment of children's learning and thinking that is associated with anxiety over family upheaval and divorce. The fact that something is amiss at home is signalled by characteristic patterns of loss of concentration, depression, and outbursts of anger and rebellion, as well as by a deterioration of the quality of the child's schoolwork.

Individual differences. One of the new realities that complicates the work of teachers and also makes it impossible to provide a univocal description of how children are changing is the expanding range of individual differences in knowledge and understanding. As the mass of available knowledge (despite the leveling effect of television) increases exponentially, variation in access to different forms of knowledge and very large differences in children's ability to integrate and correlate that which they hear and see, serve to compound the range of variation in background knowledge and intellectual competence. Among those children who are exposed to a wide range of rich stimulation who are capable of assimilating and responding to such opportunities, extraordinary feats of precocity are achieved. Teachers are amazed at their wide-ranging knowledge and intellectual maturity, and describe teaching college-level concepts to elementary school children.

At the other end of the widening spectrum of abilities and backgrounds in the public school are large numbers of children from alienated

sectors of society--minority groups and the very poor, and children with serious physical or emotional disabilities. Such children were previously sidetracked in the public schools, segregated and neglected unless they showed special promise, or excluded entirely if they were judged to fall short of the minimum level of aptitude or commitment to education. Now, legislation aimed at ending discrimination against minority groups and the handicapped has mandated the delivery of quality education to large numbers of children who were previously judged to be uneducable, that is, less able or willing to adapt to schools as they were constituted. Although this study focuses on patterns of change in middle-class children and is based on the observations of educators who have for the most part not taught in schools of the least privileged sectors, all children have been influenced by the major advances that have been made in significantly enlarging the circle of children who are expected to receive quality education. This major extension of services, an accomplishment of epoch-making proportions, has brought with it a wave of change that has reverberated throughout the public school system.

Greater Freedom

The description of children as more free encompasses many different but interrelated aspects of their development. Children are more independent, they begin to function autonomously at an earlier age. For a variety of reasons, parents have come to view children as requiring less nurturance and to give them more independence. Whether it is the mounting economic and social pressure or the personal choice of mothers to work and pursue their careers, or the greater opportunity and freedom that mothers have to engage in scheduled educational or leisure activities of their own, or the influence of child development specialists who extol the

virtues of independence and point to the damaging consequences of overprotection, children tend to be less closely supervised by their families and are seen as more capable of fending for themselves.

This altered connection between parent and child begins in early childhood. The young child of previous generations occupied a circumscribed life space that would only gradually be enlarged by grownups who, alone, could open the gates to new territories. The child's growing knowledge evolved organically out of the stable events of a life experience that was highly predictable and the guided sojourns provided by people close to him. The child was eased into a more complex world. There was more of a sense of tutelage even if socialization did not proceed by means of formal instruction or according to a deliberate plan of childrearing. The child experienced an unfolding, a continuously expanding view that was mediated by the perceptions and response patterns of an accompanying significant person, and the opportunity to view the world from the vantage point of that person. The child's shepherd might not have made an effort to explain matters, might hardly even have spoken, but the framework of introduction to the world was nevertheless formed by the speech, mood, movement patterns, affective tone, and worldly concerns of the guiding person.

In marked contrast, children of today, by merely flicking a dial, receive a barrage of stimulation unrelated to what they experience in their families. They view a steady flow of pictures of people, objects, events, and places unknown to them and hear a wide variety of cultivated speech patterns and modes of articulation and discourse. This mystifying, yet titillating, flood of stimulation is an integral part of their reality. As a result, young children are shielded less from frightening,

discordant, highly stimulating, confusing aspects of reality. Television allows children to hear and see news of world conflicts, violence, and danger at the same time and in the same manner as their parents, and not when and how their parents choose to communicate this information to them. This early exposure renders children less protected but also less dependent on parents for receiving schooling in the ways of the world. If the child is less capable of being shielded, of being taken under the wing of the parent, if the child needs the parent less, the parent is likely to invest less emotional energy, has less incentive for helping and caring and nurturing. If a less strong emotional bond is formed, if there is less glue between parent and child, there is greater separateness at a very early age.

At the same time, in the interests of gaining a still greater measure of freedom and equality in our society, there is a spirit of emancipating and disclosing, of removing curtains and barriers, an impulse toward demystifying, deidolizing, and dethroning. These trends are expressed in the overthrowal of tradition, formality, and religion, again, in order to cast aside values and customs that create false or arbitrary distinctions and that block the free expression of impulses and impose restrictions on the pursuit of pleasure. Thus, all of society is joined in what is sometimes a freeing of the selves and sometimes "a killing of the father." In all of this, there is an investment in neutralizing power, in erasing distinctions between boss and worker and, also, between adult and child. So the parent is left with much less of an aura of respect and admiration, an aura that helped to forge the emotional bond (and conflict) between parent and child. This dynamic, in turn, called forth in the parent an impulse to reciprocate, to nurture, shield, and love. This reciprocal nurturance has correspondingly been diminished.

Attitude toward authority. The change in behavior most frequently cited by teachers is that children show much less respect for authority. Today's children are almost universally portrayed as less automatically deferential, more challenging and questioning, and more mindful of their own rights. At first glance, the new stance would seem to represent progress, would seem to constitute a reasonable effort to reduce an unfair imbalance of power between teacher and pupil, long overdue. However, there are so many shades of thought and feeling associated with the complex issue of attitudes toward authority that any change in its delicate equilibrium may produce a wide band of outcomes ranging from measured alterations in response that seem to be commensurate with the change in stimulus to explosive reactions that entail a major change in adaptation. Depending on the outlook of the perceiver and the social dynamics of their school environment, children are variously described as bold and self-assured or rude and defiant.

In some school communities, the greater informality and new attitude toward authority has fostered its intended outcomes in children--greater independence and inner strength. Less distracted and disabled by fear and feelings of intimidation, children are freer to attend, to question, to participate actively and fully in learning. As the psychological distance between children and teachers is reduced, adults become more approachable and there ensues an easier, exchanging, trusting, and mutually gratifying relationship between children and their teachers. The greater self-assertiveness and self-esteem that has been achieved has enabled children to bring new energy and depth of feeling to their school work.

However, in those settings where authority was perceived as overbearing, the dominant theme has been that of "getting out from under." In

such cases, the adversarial character of the relationship between pupil and teacher has been sharpened by the changed climate. The greater license to express feeling and challenge authority merely places in relief a tension that was previously brushed aside (at cost, to be sure) in order to get some work done. Although the more open expression of opposition and defiance may have some cathartic benefit, it more often produces a decline of politeness and civility and eventuates in a damaging mean-spiritedness. The resulting contagion of disrespect deepens the schism between teacher and student.

In those cases where the antagonism is open and widespread, and has extended to the home, parents have become preoccupied with protecting their children from the power of the school. Indeed, there are new laws that redefine and restrict the sanctions that the schools may impose and that articulate the rights of redress. There is an increase in litigation directed by parents against the schools, and it is not uncommon for children to flaunt their legal rights during moments of confrontation with teachers.

In general, there is less respect accorded the teacher and the school by both the children and their parents. Younger children seem less attached to their teachers and they are described as more difficult to reach. In older children, the air of disillusionment with adults is even more strongly felt and openly expressed. In response to the mounting overt opposition, some teachers tend to withdraw emotionally in their contacts with children.

The peer group. Childhood is a time when the primary emotional investments and allegiances gradually shift from one's elders to coevals, from inside the family to the outside world. Children today are seen as

making this transition earlier and more vigorously, as turning with even greater intensity and at an earlier age to their peer group. Children appear to be more influenced by norms, values, standards established by their peers and are more apt to confide in and seek advice and comfort from their friends. In the past, the sphere of peer relationships offered companionship and the opportunity to engage in play; it provided an arena for developing skills and gauging and validating one's competence and growth during the formative years. Deep emotional commitment to peers did not develop until adolescence. It now appears that the peer group as a primary reference group comes into being earlier in the child's life. Most observers of children do not attribute this pattern to an intensification of the affective bond to peers as much as to the attenuation of the connection between child and adult. Thus, the greater dependence on peer group would seem to have occurred by default, to have resulted from the weakening of the bond between child and adult.

Numerous interrelated factors converge to produce this trend. If children reach various developmental landmarks sooner, the tendency to become invested in the peer group at an earlier age is in part merely another reflection of a more generalized pattern of accelerated development. Similarly, as children develop more rapidly, they become less dependent on adults at an earlier age. Furthermore, the greater openness and informality of society, combined with the greater competence and earlier independence achieved by children, give them freer rein to face feelings of rivalry with adults, to express more openly the adversarial side of their relationship. It may be speculated that this openly expressed competition, in turn, leads children to detach themselves from adults still more. Moreover, in testing the limits of their developing

independence, children probably bring about more alienation from adults than they intend. Not only are they apt to reach for levels of independence that they are unable to handle comfortably but, in their quest for and assertion of independence, children are likely to disappoint and antagonize adults who are themselves not prepared for so early a separation.

Children are drawn to their peer group not only because their increased competence and independence allow them to separate themselves from adults, but because they have also found that they cannot count on them. Parents are so busy working, extending and completing their education, engaging in travel and leisure, striving to preserve or restore their own youth that they are simply not available as much, and children have no choice but to adapt to this fact. The resentment aroused by parental unavailability, together with its harsh reality, serves to further thrust the child into the peer group. In effect, children are finding adults less reliable than they supposed them to be, collectively as well as individually and personally. The lack of resolution in adults' lives becomes ever more apparent as divorce rates rise and people more openly admit defeat and show disarray. Children's greater knowledge of world events is replete with evidence of widespread moral turpitude as well as of adult failure to solve problems of overriding importance. In addition, the pace of social change is so rapid that intergenerational communication may have become more difficult and less useful. As Margaret Mead suggested (19), in a rapidly changing society, adults may have less guidance to offer to the next generation.

Another factor contributing to the strengthening of the peer group would appear to stem from recent trends in educational reform. In an

overdue effort to humanize the schools, to make the child's school experience less humiliating and more ego-enhancing, and to free the child to use resources of feeling and thought that were frozen by the demands for passivity and self-control, the schools gradually became child-centered. As part of this new educational framework, it was recognized that children needed to feel free to respond spontaneously and to be able to communicate with each other if they were to become more actively involved in the process of learning and problem solving. In the course of this veritable educational revolution (whose basic value can scarcely be questioned), the process of peer group identification underwent powerful reinforcement. Whereas children were once forbidden to talk to each other and expected to direct their attention to the teacher, they now spend most of the school day conversing with friends and working on projects together. Indeed, the transformation has been so complete that there are times when the teacher is viewed as an intruder, an interloper in the world of children.

The adoption of child-centered methods of education has had both a direct and indirect effect on the solidification of the peer group. When implemented properly, the new education enables the child to sail into a sea of peer interaction. But, in many cases, teachers are ill-equipped either intellectually or emotionally to adapt to the greater complexity and flexibility that the new educational methods demand. Originally drawn to the field by images of the teacher role that no longer hold and trained according to the traditional mold, and with only limited access to resources for retraining, many teachers feel defeated and impotent in the face of professional demands they cannot meet. Children's encounters with such adults, especially in an era when there is less obligation to respect elders, reinforce their movement away from adults.

Other changes in the educational milieu, as well, have served to strengthen children's ties to their peer group. Now that more and more children are transported to school by bus, their initiation into the world of school each day is in a conveyance populated by children of varying ages in which the only adult present is preoccupied with a task that is unrelated to their behavior, and who is neither expected nor trained to supervise the behavior of the children. Thus, the environment that immediately precedes the beginning of the school day is marked by the dominance of the peer group and the recessive position and ineffectuality of the adult. Similarly, now that children are encouraged, if not required, to eat lunch in school, they are once more presented with a large-group situation in which there is but marginal and largely irritating and ineffectual adult supervision. In effect, the austere, autocratic teacher-dominated school of yesteryear has been replaced by a system in which children are for the most part left to themselves.

An abstract force contributing to the greater coalescence of the peer group is the ideology that calls for the solidarity of oppressed peoples, based on the conviction that their newly found power derives from group allegiance and joint action. Hardly a new concept, it has been reactivated and given fresh meaning and shown to have impressive power in the civil rights movement and the women's movement, and by the increasing sophistication of lobbying effects in behalf of vested interests. As segments of the population undergo stratification according to their vested group interests, children take their cue to unite from the group solidarity of others. They are urged on in the current spirit of liberation and reform by those whose missionary zeal extends to the universally oppressed group--children. Thus, children are included in most informal

rosters of oppressed groups and, indeed, the legal rights of children are foremost among current efforts to solidify and extend legal protection to victims of oppression. Thus, insofar as freedom for children means freedom from adult supervision, the new investment in the peer group underlines the greater freedom enjoyed by children.

Values and moral development. When asked how children are changing, teachers allude to changing mores and values, but seldom refer to issues pertaining to moral development. They are quick to comment upon the lack of respect they encounter in children. Citing the challenging, self-assertive, often belligerent style of children today, they mourn the decline of manners and politeness. When these changes are reported, they are treated as stylistic features of behavior; they are not linked to issues of morality.

Young children in the early grades of elementary school are viewed as wholesomely alert and vigorous. Their lack of fearfulness and respectfulness is largely seen as admirable, as liberating, as a sign of advance in independence and competence. Less cowed by authority, the young child is thought of as ingenuously poised to take on the world. As children grow older and move into the upper grades of elementary school, their openness and frankness become more oppositional. Their declining motivation, lack of respect for teachers, and academic disinterest lead to the conclusion that children value education less, and that they are less concerned with how they are valued by educators.

The different meaning of school life for children needs to be examined in the light of other changes in the child's day-to-day life pattern and value structure. Children have many more possessions. They are given more expensive gifts and have more money at their disposal than before.

The value of money and what it can be used to acquire is much clearer to them; it is a more salient commodity in their lives. They know how to get it and use it and it means a lot to them. It constitutes still another dimension of adult life previously closed off to children, like sexuality, about which they are now conversant and in which they actively participate. The materialism of children, their knowledgeability and emotional investment in buying and acquiring, in consumerism, is a more developed and operative value.

Desirous of material possessions, and less conflicted than adults by alternative demands and responsibilities about the use of money, children can be more singleminded and self-gratifying than adults in their spending. Indeed, teachers claim that some of the exchanges of Christmas gifts among children from homes of modest means are astonishingly lavish. Similarly, many students drive cars that they themselves acquired which teachers cannot afford. There is a much closer approximation of parity between children and adults in terms of their material concerns, possessions, sophistication, and awareness about what they need, and where and how to get it.

In marked contrast to the increased appeal of material possessions is children's lack of interest in heroes. They appear to have far fewer heroes, and those they do have are admired for different reasons. The hero of today's child is more likely to be a live entertainer or sports star. It would seem more appropriate to regard these figures as anti-heroes because they are often admired for traits not traditionally associated with heroism. But the overriding impression is one of a general absence of hero figures. One veteran high school social studies teacher described how he used to start off the semester by asking each member of

the class to name his/her hero along with the five most important events in history, but he has discontinued the custom because the students are so unresponsive to such themes. Almost all teachers note the paucity of references to hero figures in children's discussions or writing. They tend to interpret this absence, along with the rising popularity of antiheroes, as evidence of the increased cynicism of young people and their diminished interest in events of the past.

The behavior model to which most children seem to aspire is that of the bold, often wise-cracking individual who is, above all, cool and self-sufficient. This demeanor has always appealed to American children, especially adolescents, but less exclusively and uniformly than it does today. In the past, there have been other competing messages and visions that affected children deeply. The family emphasized nurturance and sentimentality. But now that these other voices and sentiments, sustained by impulses of family loyalty, patriotism, and religious spirit, are dimmed or discredited and the prepotent images offered by television go uncontested, the mask of detachment prevails. It is as if the adoption of a hero figure in accordance with traditional, adult-oriented perspectives would constitute a betrayal of the child group. Children have turned away from such issues and values. Thoughts about monumental achievements of the past and feelings of admiration for and identification with persons who have performed extraordinary feats applauded by the adult world have become much less salient in the lives of children.

These observations suggest that the identificatory process is less operative and less important in the lives of children. Children have a different relation to the adult world. They are, on the one hand, more aloof from it; they feel less enmeshed in the adult world and less under

its thumb. At the same time, by virtue of their greater independence and more rapid growth, they feel less out of it, less removed from it. Their aloofness, a means of reaffirming their independence, makes it more difficult for them to feel and express admiration toward adults. A college counselor notes that students much less frequently refer to teachers who have inspired them. Teachers, as mentors and possessors of masterful knowledge and wisdom, are much less often esteemed.

Perhaps because of the unmorality of children and of the times, teachers are not disposed to speak of the moral behavior of children. When pressed to do so, they tend to describe children as less steeped in the problem of distinguishing between good and evil. One is left with the image of a child who is much less burdened by feelings of guilt and less preoccupied with matters of right and wrong.

The apathy and independence that they describe in children appears to extend to the realm of morality as well. The aloofness and unconcern with moral issues in the early years lapses into a posture of laxity, denial, and expedience as children grow older. Another way to describe what teachers report is that issues of morality seem to be less affect-laden for today's child. They cause less pain and less conflict. When moral constraints form barriers to gratification, they are more easily bypassed. Moral issues are seen less in monumental terms than as functional principles that need to be dealt with. The lack of interest in moral issues leads to a more casual posture toward abiding by the rules. More open and straightforward, children are less burdened and distorted by pangs of guilt and feelings of unworthiness. In adopting an instrumental attitude toward morality, children have stripped this sphere of its oppressive overtones. Moral principles seem to be viewed by them merely as obstacles

to goals. They are seen through a functional lens rather than as lofty ideas worthy of special respect.

On second thought, teachers report seeing more flouting of rules and more instances of dishonesty, but such events seem less sinister and insidious because of the openness and casualness of children's attitudes toward morality. There is, in fact, more thievery in the schools. Children have come to assume that if items of value are not kept locked up, they will disappear. When something of value is lost, it is inferred that it will not be returned. The notion of treating others as we, ourselves, would like to be treated rarely surfaces, as though it were an alien, convoluted, and mystical piety that is not relevant to our times.

Children are more practical and goal-directed. They seem to be genuinely confused about what is right and wrong except insofar as it has implications for goal achievement. The rules of morality seem to be abstract, arbitrary principles associated with a game no longer being played and therefore of no particular merit. As a result, little indignation is aroused by misappropriation of property. The focus, instead, is on forestalling such events. For example, when asked to explain the gradual disappearance of toys provided expressly to amuse children whose schedule requires them to arrive at school before the onset of the official school day, a child responded by conjecturing that those who had taken them must not have had such items at home. It was as though such a circumstance justified their being taken. When the teacher suggested that they ought to try to get them back, the children matter-of-factly replied that once they were taken home they would not be returned. The child's response seemed to provide an accurate appraisal of the motives involved and what might reasonably be expected to happen next. And his offhand,

accepting manner seemed to imply that what was at stake were equally valid and arbitrary alternative rules of conduct that had clashed.

Among teenagers, shoplifting is extremely widespread. What is different today is that this activity is casually discussed within earshot of teachers, as though it represents an accepted alternative means of securing possessions. At one level, these meant-to-be-overheard conversations are a tease and an expression of defiance; at another, they reflect a confusion about what is right and wrong. In part, television adds to this confusion by enuring children to acts of crime and violence. They are exposed to such a steady flow of hideous violent and criminal acts that they learn to set these events aside and think less of them. And, indeed, acts of petty thievery seem trivial in the light of the flow of horrors that children have learned to live with and ignore. Further, it is in some ways difficult to disentangle the fictionalized crime and violence portrayed on television for the purpose of exciting and entertaining the viewer from actual tragic events of violence reported in news programs. For example, when the Pope was shot and a class was allowed to watch a television news program's rebroadcast of the event, children moaned in disgust when the film clip failed to show the actual shooting. Teachers comment on how quickly children recover from news of tragedies; these events evoke only the most momentary reactions of revulsion and disgust. A noteworthy exception to this pattern is the gentleness and compassion that children show to physically handicapped children. There is something about these phenomena that evoke their most tender and generous impulses.

Teachers report that there is much more cheating on tests, partly because children are more used to collaborating and seem not to understand

that there is anything wrong with sharing their work on exams as well. At another level, this behavior would seem to reflect a disregard, even contempt, for anything that stands in the way of goal achievement. Teachers have also observed that there is more lying. There is both a greater readiness to avoid unpleasantness by falsifying, as though it were a more efficient, practical route to dealing with a problem, and also a greater boldness and adeptness that is new. When a child is accused of having committed a misdeed, there is a much greater tendency to deny that the event actually took place, despite quite obvious, implicating evidence. It is as though there is a heavier reliance on denial as a means of dealing with problems.

There is no clear agreement among teachers about how warmly and nobly children treat each other. Some teachers see children as more expressive and generous and closer to each other, as more supportive and helpful. But it is not clear whether such patterns represent genuine acts of heightened friendship or simply greater reliance and dependency on the peer group that is not necessarily accompanied by greater warmth and feelings of fondness. On the other hand, some teachers are impressed with how cruel children are to each other, how openly hostile and physically brutal they can be. They describe a relentlessness and severity of meanness that surpasses levels previously observed. What is more surprising, these acts of cruelty are accepted and passed over as though there is a new standard, as though this is the way it really is, as though children expect to be treated that way. One way of reconciling these seemingly contradictory descriptions of behavioral trends is to posit that children are simply more open in expressing both their warm and tender feelings toward each other and their feelings of anger and resentment.

Acceleration of Development

It has been emphasized that, by virtue of television, the child enters the world of adults almost from the very beginning of life (or from the time the child has access to adult programs and can begin to understand them), hears the same language, much of the same level of discourse, and receives the same information. Some of the mystery and the difference between the life of the child and the adult no longer obtains. In this sense, the child and the adult are peers and are thrust into the same stream of life from the very beginning; the child no longer trails in the footsteps of the parent with gaze fixed on the leader.

Children are seen as growing up much more rapidly. The kindergartners of today are thought to resemble first and second graders of years back, and 12-year-olds remind teachers of the 14-year-olds of yesterday. The schoolaged child (a term which, itself, requires redefinition as increasing numbers of children have begun to attend full-time preschool, and preschool begins at an earlier age) is viewed as more self-assured, poised, outspoken, more comfortable in dealing with adults, and more capable of maneuvering in his environment.

Children become (dimly) aware of worldly matters at an earlier age, and develop means of coping with a much wider, more complicated (though poorly understood) array of forces. Having learned to adapt to a more complex reality, and coveting, always, the power and the competence and the privilege that are associated with being grown up, children show an earlier readiness to function within an adult framework. Armed with more knowledge and coping skills, and finding it easier to model patterns of adult behavior from the steady stream of stereotypic portrayals that television provides, children pass through the developmental cycles more rapidly.

These changes, reported in rural as well as urban and suburban settings (although the rate of acceleration and degree of sophistication is greater in cities), do not necessarily make education smoother or more effective. The period of wide-eyed innocence and thirst for learning is more fleeting and less clear-cut. The distractions of sexuality intrude earlier, and the flirtations and boy-girl preoccupations are followed by what is described by teachers to be a less secretive and more widely participating and sooner-appearing period of sexual activity. By the time many youngsters reach the middle of high school, they have acquired so many material possessions, experienced so much bought entertainment, achieved so sophisticated a degree of sexual awareness, and have been propelled into such heights of self-reliance by virtue of alterations in the quality of family support and their own rapidly growing worldliness, that they have achieved many of the most visible and cherished features of adult status, and it is difficult for them to think of themselves as needing still more preparation for life.

Numerous factors contribute to this pattern of accelerated awareness and development: (1) Because it is no longer possible to shield children from frightening and potentially disturbing events, children are forced to confront and come to terms with disturbing forces in the environment at an earlier age. (2) For a variety of reasons, children function more autonomously at an earlier age. Independence is among the most salient defining features of adulthood. (3) Society has adopted a more open attitude toward sexuality. The ubiquitous lewd magazines in the corner store, the greater sexual explicitness of television programming and motion pictures, the pornography available on home box office television, and the increasingly sexual character of advertising heightens awareness of sexuality and

leads to demystification of a key aspect of the adult world. (4) Educators, too, have come to define progress by demonstrating that the same material can be learned by children at an earlier age, thereby joining the race to have children reach adult competence sooner. (5) Manufacturers of toys and clothing, aware of the fascination with pretending that children are miniature adults, find it profitable to play the game of obliterating child-adult distinctions by magically and whimsically plunging the child into a world of adult outward appearance. Thus, at school, in the home, on the street, and in the marketplace, children are helped to feel that there are fewer barriers between them and adult status.

At first glance, the acceleration of development would seem to be an accomplishment that is entirely laudable. Insofar as we associate childhood with helplessness, vulnerability, and incompetence and regard the main task of childhood to be that of growing up, then the earlier emergence from this stage of becoming is to be celebrated. Acceleration of development represents still another way in which modern life represents a triumph over darkness. But questions need to be raised regarding the cost of this quickened pace of growth and whether it is solid and integrated. Are children ripening faster or have we found ways to make them look ready sooner although their internal growth remains essentially unchanged? Is the swiftness of change, itself, disruptive?

At least part of the acceleration of development has been brought about by the greater accessibility of models of adult appearance and demeanor. Growing up has always entailed emulating the outer appearance of adults, as when children secretly lock themselves in a room with a mirror to try on a parent's hat and begin to mimic adult expressions and mannerisms. This imitative process is reinforced a hundredfold by the

visual medium of television. The parade of visual cues that reveal how adults walk and talk and dress, along with the advertisements that punctuate the programming, are replete with messages about the central importance of external appearance. Clearly, a heightened sensitivity to the appearance of things spearheads today's accelerated march toward growing up. But once children look older, they are given more freedom and responsibility, and they begin to be treated as older people. The pattern of accelerated growth may be propelled by a focus on the appearance of being older, but it gradually leads to a transformation that is likely to affect (though unevenly) most aspects of adaptation.

The unevenness of the accelerated development, the fact that it does not take place across the board, is likely to go unnoticed. When we say, for example, that children are six months or a year ahead of where they were 12 years ago, not only is the characterization of change less precise than the quantitative statement implies, but the quantitative estimate represents an average of changes that represents a multitude of processes, some of which are more accelerated and others less advanced. The synchrony of development changes along with the rate. We need to begin to examine the process of acceleration and change in a more analytic and differentiated way from a developmental and functional standpoint.

The questions that need to be asked are longstanding ones. In the past, they were raised in connection with individual cases of growing up very fast. Now this state of affairs, in one way or another, applies to most children. Does rapid development lead to the assumption of responsibilities that children cannot carry and will it thereby bring undue stress? Does it bring unnecessary failures that damage self-esteem, and baffling or unrewarding relationships and premature sexuality that predis-

pose the child to disappointment and confusion that have enduring adverse impact? Will it deprive children of valuable time in which to know themselves and develop their inner lives and thereby impair their ability to make a solid occupational choice and to engage in effective educational planning? Is the acceleration of development today skewed in the direction of more visible and surface aspects of the growth process? Will the focus on the observable and the external foster greater emptiness?

Adding to the complexity of the accelerating pace of development of children is the failure of most adults (parents and teachers) to apprehend and assimilate these changes. As a result, they misjudge or misinterpret children's behavior in ways that adversely affect their relationships with children. For example, children today show some of the signs of distancing themselves from the family during their middle years (9-11) rather than in their teens. This new reserve and quest for independence in the child of the middle years may be interpreted by parents as a sign of stubbornness, uncooperativeness, and personal rejection. Parents are left with a sense of failure and with feelings of anger and disappointment that may lead them to withdraw from their children at a time when the children are testing and reassessing their relationships to the parents. Were these same behaviors manifested in an older child, they would somehow be understood or at least seem familiar to the parent, but their earlier onset becomes a source of disturbance and disappointment that compounds the stress of growing up.

The schools have felt impelled to fall into line and buy into the value of the general speedup of things, partly in order to accommodate to the faster pace of children's development so that their work with children remains age-appropriate. In addition, they are eager to prove to their

constituencies that they are not stodgy and behind the times. One of the dilemmas facing the schools is whether they should resist the wave of acceleration where it is not useful and serve as a moderating force in a society that is moving too quickly, or whether it should itself be as hip as any other segment of society and thereby invite confidence that children are in the hands of alert and modern guides. How does one slow down a speeding train? If you stick your foot out and drag it along the ground, you merely wear out your shoes and run the risk of hurting your feet.

Overview

In reviewing the findings and examining their implications for education, it should be reemphasized that the informants were selective in the changes that they chose to mention. Some of the patterns of change that were described were situationally determined, that is, were elicited by changes in the educational environment. When teachers describe how children are changing, they speak mainly from the perspective of how the task of educating children is changing. The changes they observe in children are, therefore, interwoven with changes in the educational environment that have elicited these patterns. Changes in the educational climate and method are both cause and effect; they are a response to changes in children and, at the same time, present a stimulus situation different from that of 30 years ago that evokes correspondingly different behavior. Among the changes in the schools that interact with the nature of changes in children are the following:

1. The school has become less proprietary and elitist. It has less exclusive control over establishing standards, selecting students, and

determining what is to be taught. The teacher is viewed as a public servant rather than as a trustee of the school.

2. The greater informality of the schools alters the tone of the educational atmosphere. The decline of tradition and ritual and the elimination of oppressive moral imperatives make for a less somber and serious school life.

3. The teacher's role has become more managerial and less purely instructional, partly because there are more teaching specialists and more programmed forms of instruction to carry out the teaching function, and partly because schools are seen less exclusively in an instructional light. The acquisition of information is regarded as but one facet of a continuum of cognitive and social development with which the school is concerned, now that we have grown accustomed to looking at the school through a prism of psychological development rather than academic achievement.

4. The school is seen as more continuous with the home, and is being asked to take on some of its responsibilities--to serve meals, provide after-school care, present information and guidance with regard to sex and drug taking, and offer counseling. Whereas, in the past, education was viewed as a privilege, as a supplemental, circumscribed activity in the life of the child that offered cultural enrichment dispensed by enlightened professionals, it is now seen as an integral part of the child care system. Curiously, having been assigned a more fundamental, universal role, teachers are valued less. They are now seen as auxiliaries to the parent, as part of a vast network of service providers, along with summer camp operators, baby sitters, tutors, and coaches who ease the increasingly complicated burden of child minding and guiding, thereby enabling

parents to live more freely and fully. When the complexity of a job is magnified, and we decide to delegate it to others without having a clearcut basis for establishing accountability, we often deal with the resulting ambiguity and ambivalence by downgrading its importance.

5. Changes in the size and location of the physical plant of the school and in the mode of transporting children to school place new constraints on the role of the school and the character of school life.

Issues and Implications

Taking the above-mentioned factors into account, the findings of this study of how children are changing have implications for continuing efforts to improve education that are related to the following issues:

1. The vastly expanded range of variation among students in background knowledge and understanding complicates efforts to teach them. Children differ in their access to the wealth of information that can be obtained from television and other media and travel, and this variation is compounded by differences in the ability to integrate the rising flow of information. The range of variation is further broadened by the fact that the doors of schools have been opened wider to include children who are less capable of responding effectively to schooling.

2. The problem of achieving educational excellence has less to do with the issue of establishing appropriate standards than with the task of motivating students. Children are less impressed with standards, are less intimidated by teachers, and have far less fear of academic failure. Children experience less pressure for academic achievement from the home and are less influenced by parental wishes and expectations. Given their greater pragmatism, today's children are likely to become invested in academic achievement only if they can see its payoff value. The idea of

working hard now in order to achieve greater pleasure later is a difficult principle for children to embrace in light of the prevailing ethos of securing immediate pleasure. Children have more material possessions and have fewer adult perquisites and privileges denied to them. Missing less of the adult world, they have less to look forward to. Moreover, the world they live in is so unstable and unreliable that it does not even seem wise to defer to longterm expectations. In order to achieve greater pride in accomplishment, we need to cultivate greater intrinsic motivation by using incentives that are more personally defined and associated with inner feelings of satisfaction.

3. The task of maintaining and achieving academic standards is complicated by the growing trend toward individualized education which requires a sliding scale of standards and expectations. Widely regarded as representing a major advance in teaching strategy, this approach calls for communicating and monitoring an array of different standards and expectations that are differentially appropriate for children with different levels of ability to learn. Such an arrangement leads to slippage and a softer posture toward the issue of standards. Although the standards set for each child are more realistic and meaningful, they are a less compelling force because of difficulties in monitoring so many different expectations.

4. The raised consciousness with regard to psychological states and psychological well-being, and the greater tendency for children to openly discuss intimate details of family life, brings to bear a new perspective from which to view the well-being and progress of children in school, one that competes with and diminishes the traditional concern with academic achievement. Considerations of psychological support and well-being occupy a greater portion of the agenda of educators.

5. One of the main barriers to academic achievement is the lack of connectedness between children and adults (parents and teachers). Children are not open to being inspired, and teachers in their new style of functioning as impersonal managers of regimens of learning activities are less likely to be inspiring. Identificatory behavior is a less prominent feature of psychological development today. We need to find ways of making the adult a more salient figure in the lives of children.

6. The expanded school curriculum is far-ranging, sophisticated, and confronts issues of great complexity. Thus, it is not uncommon for teachers to deal with such imponderables as the dangers of nuclear warfare, the problem of disappearing fuel supplies and impending ecological crises, and to begin to explore problems of human adjustment. Though relevant and intrinsically interesting, the discussion of such issues may leave children more anxious and despairing and without a sense of mastery and clarity about a circumscribed realm of knowledge. Moreover, it may be speculated that, once such overridingly important issues are raised, it becomes more difficult for children to attend to the more prosaic and abstract spheres of academic learning.

The fragmentary quality of knowledge, as well as its steadily broadening scope, along with the expanding opportunity to sample tidbits, suggests that children will grow up increasingly on a diet of intellectual snacks gathered from a wide range of sources--not unlike the multinational snack bars that are sprouting in the new shopping malls. It will be up to the school to give the children the experience of sitting down to a full meal. Educators need to focus on protecting and strengthening children's sense of groundedness, coherence, and completeness. Toward this end, they need to find systems and frameworks of knowledge that will allow thorough immersion and mastery.

7. Although the decline in academic performance becomes more severe in the upper grades, and high school students seem to be the group that is most disaffected from school, the alienation observed in high school represents a natural unfolding of a process that has its origin in the early grades. Whatever efforts are made to alter this dynamic need to begin early in the school careers of children, when basic attitudes toward work and the self as a learner are established. The problem is less one of the souring of students than of a failure to become sufficiently rooted in the world of schoolwork.

8. The tendency to upgrade the curriculum by lowering the age level at which children learn particular areas of subject matter should be reassessed despite its obvious widespread appeal. Such changes give the impression of a speedup, improvement in efficiency, and leave children and their parents feeling that they are advanced in their development and achievement. But the net effect is to scale down the depth in which a topic is studied and to reinforce the idea that things can be gotten over with in a hurry and that speed of performance and growth is what really matters.

9. The role of parents in the educational life of children is largely unsupportive and quite undermining of the school. Although parents are better educated and tend to value education (at the same time that they have come to take it for granted), they are too busy and distracted to take an active interest in their children's schoolwork. They are, for the most part, unwilling or unavailable to help children with the schoolwork at home or to follow through on suggestions made by teachers. At the same time, they maintain an unfriendly, adversarial attitude toward the school. If there is to be a rededication of effort in behalf of

achieving excellence in the schools, it will require more effective collaboration between school and home and more active participation on the part of parents.